"The Music of Omar Waqar:

An Ethnomusicological Study and Analysis of Anarcho-Sufism in America"

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Senior Honors Thesis

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Blair School of Music

Vanderbilt University

2018

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Introduction

Born December 8, 1980, Omar Pitras Waqar is an anarcho-Sufi punk musician, poet, and classically trained sitarist now based in Los Angeles, although he grew up and acquired most of his fan base in Washington, D.C. Omar's mother and grandmother were both from Ambala in the Haryana state of India before they moved to Pakistan after the partition in 1947, and this is one of the many reasons he refers to himself as "South Asian" rather than "Pakistani." His music combines Sufi performance and poetic traditions with a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) mentality, while maintaining consistent anarchic themes across all genres. As a South Asian Sufi diaspora musician, Omar[1] is able to draw from several traditions to form a sonic collage that speaks to his

[1] Throughout the thesis I will refer to Omar Waqar in the informal way that he requested I address him throughout my fieldwork. This mirrors the way in which he is also addressed by his peers and his audiences.

unique cultural and religious identifications. The focus of this thesis will be on the connection of these traditions and their past, present, and future social and political relevance in the United States, as these seemingly different traditions hold important parallels for Omar and his "reclaiming" of Sufism[2] as an identification rather than an essentialized tactic in political campaigns.

Throughout this thesis I will use the term "identifications" in order to forefront the temporary, fluid, and multiple nature of our identities (Hall 2000). While the term "identity" implies a singular and stable category, "identifications" is meant to imply an ongoing and continuous process in which an array of various subject positions and standpoints are in flux. This approach will be essential to the understanding of Omar's shift from taqwacore to what he calls anarcho-Sufi punk, and it will address the many identifications Omar maintains while making music across his three current projects. Hyphenated identifications are different from many other identifications in that multiplicity is built into the label itself; the hyphen "effectively produces spaces of distance" while simultaneously producing a "union of contradictions" that marks "places of both ambiguity and multiplicity" (Mahtani 2002, 67). Through the hyphenation of "anarchist" with "Sufi" it becomes obvious that there is more than one underlying character at play, and that these multiple characters are being brought together through a chain of equivalence. However, these characters are not completely coextensive; instead, between them

[2] While Sufism is often understood as the mystical branch of Islam, the term "Sufism" is much more complex than simply Muslim mysticism. Although the term "mysticism" suggests that Sufism involves personal contact with the Divine, the emphasis on personal and private experience fails to account for some of the corporate, or, in Omar's case, political activities of Sufi groups. In this thesis, I will use Sufism in the broadest descriptive sense to include not only people who describe themselves or are described by others as Sufis, but also the whole range of historical tradition and practices connected with Sufis.

exists a potentially overlying but antagonistic relationship that emerges from their multiplicity represented by the hyphen, which both separates and brings together in the same gesture. While it is true of all identification processes that a multiplicity is being brought together to create an imagined whole, hyphenated subjectivities are unique in that the wholeness is both fractured and united by the hyphen.

This hyphenated nature of the identification is a part of what makes "anarcho-Sufi" conceptually intriguing. An important distinction must then be made between hyphenated "anarcho-Sufi" and "anarcho-punk," as the word order and hyphen placement is essential to understanding Omar's identifications as an "anarcho-Sufi punk" musician. Although these categories are used by Omar himself, he explicitly and implicitly draws from other genres. The "anarcho" bridge between "punk" and "Sufi" highlights and allows space for aspects of his musical techniques (such as sampling or the use of electronics) and other modes of transmission that may not be considered by listeners as part of the genre otherwise, and as one of my professors understandably suggested, "this doesn't sound like punk."

This paper is informed by an ethnographic approach; through a series of formal and informal interviews with Omar, engaging with his community in Los Angeles, attending performances, and communicating with Omar before and after my fieldwork, I aim to let his voice speak for itself while analyzing the positionality of mystical Sufism within the contemporary performances of Omar Waqar's music. In order to do so, I first posit the question, "What are the elements that communicate something essential of the nature of Sufism within Omar's music?" By posing such

a question, I will by necessity define and describe the traditions in order to address the specific ways in which such a tradition has been transmitted. I will discuss the impact that Sufi performance traditions and modern recording technology has had on Omar's sociomusical compositional style, as well as its impact on the transformation of the term and concept of "Sufi" from something describing a functional religious tradition—meant to move audiences to spiritual ecstasy—to a much broader genre of music. As someone originally outside of the tradition who is looking and listening in, I will also comment on the ability of the music itself to engage diverse audiences around the world.

In Chapter One I will examine the birth of taqwacore following the band Junoon, taqwacore's relationship to politics in the United States, and Omar's departure from a genre deemed "Muslim punk." Chapter Two will outline Omar's broad interpretation of the word "punk," his use of the DIY mentality to sample from several different genres in his Sarmust and EvilArtForm projects, and his desire to affect change on a local level. Chapter Three will discuss the South Asian performance and poetic techniques that appear in and inspire Omar's music, as well as a more general "way of being" prevalent in Sufi and anarcho-Sufi poetry, elements used most frequently in Omar's most recent project, Garden's for the Lush.

"Beginnings in *Taqwacore*"

Chapter 1

"Taqwacore," a combination of the Arabic word for "piety" and "hardcore," is a genre first prophesized in Michael Muhammed Knight's 2002 novel, *The Taqwacores*, in which Muslim punks share a house in New York, chronicling the negotiation and reconciliation of punk and Islam. In a radio interview, Michael Muhammad Knight was asked how punk and Islam could possibly be compatible. Knight responded succinctly that the Prophet Mohammed resisted unjust power in his time, and that Muslim punk strives to replicate that vein of hegemonic resistance (Prescott 2009). Taqwacore resists the marginalization of Muslims, especially South Asian Muslims, by both the United States and Islamic fundamentalists worldwide. For a genre based in Islam, an extra layer is added when a large part of the Muslim world considers music *haram,* or forbidden.[3] The same sort of fundamentalism that led to the taqwacore band Secret Trial Five being kicked off stage at the Islamic Society of North America conference in 2007 (Murthy 2010, 172) has also led to recent attacks on Sufi musicians and shrines carried out by the Islamic

[3] It is relevant to note here that the Chisti order is the only Sufi order in South Asia to advocate the use of music.

State in Pakistan.[4] Prior to the emergence of taqwacore, the Pakistani rock band Junoon (active 1990 to 2005) gained worldwide attention for speaking out against government corruption, especially that of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Pakistan's return to Islamic fundamentalism. Junoon was banned in Pakistan in 1998 but welcomed by British and American governments to perform in "concerts for peace." Salman Ahmad became the global face of Sufism as a means to fight fundamentalism and present a less-threatening version of Islam.

The band's front-man, Salman Ahmad, increasingly incorporated *rāga*[5]-like melodies and *tabla*[6] as he studied with legendary *qawwal*[7] Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Junoon's music incorporated Sufi poetry, most frequently that of Punjabi poet Bulleh Shah (1680-1758), whose name and philosophies will appear frequently throughout this thesis. Junoon's *Azadi* album (1997) includes the song "Lal meri pat," a poem originally written by Amir Khusro and later modified by Bulleh Shah, which honors Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, the highly respected Sufi saint known for preaching religious tolerance between Muslims and Hindus (Mokhtar 2012, 4). "Bulleya," a track first appearing on *Parvaaz* in 1999, later appeared on several other albums in multiple versions, including *Junoon for Peace* (2001) and *United for Peace* (2001). The original release and its reprise begin with a melismatic tribute to "Bulleya," although unlike the traditional unmetered, arhythmic quality of the opening qawwali framework, a strict 4/4 time signature is enforced by the electric guitar from the first downbeat.

[4] See Tsioulcas, Anastasia. 2016. "Why Was A Prominent Muslim Musician Gunned Down In Pakistan?" NPR.
[5] A melodic framework for composition and improvisation in Indian classical music; akin to a mode in Western art music.
[6] A small pair of membranophones with the right tuned to tonic and the left tuned to either the fifth or octave below.
[7] A singer of *qawwali,* a popular form of Sufi devotional music in South Asia.

The first track on their *Andaz* album (2001), "Zamane Ke Andaz" is from a poem by philosopher and politician Muhammad Iqbal, which looks toward a new era of increased and new modes of thinking. The first lines of the second stanza are below.

Zamānē kē andāz badle gāyē	The style of the times has changed
Naya rāg hai, sāz badle gāyē	There is a new raag, the instruments have changed[8]

While Iqbal likely used the raag metaphorically, Junoon's incorporation of these lines takes on a literal and political meaning, speaking to the influence of the West on South Asia, especially its musical traditions.

In response, The Kominas, three Pakistani-American musicians raised between Boston and Lahore in the 1990s and perhaps the best-known group of "Punkistanis," were infuriated by Junoon's appropriation of Pakistan's treasured Sufi verse, echoing sentiments across South Asia that their poetry and music had been corrupted by rock instruments and Western melodies. Things came to a head when the conservative Colorado-based author Asma Gull Hasan, a Republican donor and cousin to Ahmad, launched "Muslims for Bush," a movement that supported former president George W. Bush's election campaign in 2004. Hasan deliberately used Junoon's "Sufi rock" as a soundtrack. Appalled by her use of Sufi music to drum up support for a Western political campaign, the band gained wide-scale public attention for the release of their explicit and gritty "dis songs" against Junoon and Asma Hasan, "I Want a Handjob" and "Rumi Was a Homo." The band was subsequently sued by Hasan for defamation (Aidi 2012, 80). Young Muslim punks took to online forums such as Pheer.com and music and video sharing

[8] Translations are my own.

websites in response. Omar was also a member of this community; he used sites such as MySpace, SoundCloud, YouTube, and Bandcamp to promote Diacritical's music and connect with artists of similar backgrounds, eventually leading to his inclusion in the taqwacore genre. That emerging genre, often referred to as "Muslim punk," was solidified in 2007 when The Kominas—along with Vote Hezbollah, Secret Trial Five, Al Thawra, and Omar's Diacritical—toured the country and appeared in the film *The Taqwacores* (2010) with Diacritical helping produce the film's soundtrack.

The taqwacore scene has perhaps most importantly provided a safe space for progressive South Asian Muslims to organize and freely express themselves through shared life experiences, especially at a time of increased Islamophobia in the United States. When asked about his influences, Omar named exclusively bands with Muslim, South Asian, or South Asian artists living in the diaspora, instead of linking his music to artists of a specific genre.

> When I was coming up, it definitely felt as though there were few people who I could identify with, but I watched it change around me with my own eyes. There was an awesome band from D.C. called Gist that had a South Asian singer and played some straight up killer post-hardcore shit with gnarly guitar sounds and awesome grooves, and then later on I found out about the 1979 UK Pakistanis Alien Kulture who have been around since the birth of punk; The Cassettes from D.C. had an awesome South Asian drummer, and the anarcho-punk band RAI KO RIS (originally from Nepal) is still doing it up I think, Co-ven from Pakistan killed it on the rooftops and fearlessly challenged authority, and man, tons of other bands that might lend to a similar experience.

Because ethnic and religious minorities were not often given access to record labels, it was difficult for Omar to identify with mainstream media. He quotes the lyrics of "Fu-Gee-La" by the 1990's hip-hop group the Fugees: "Farakkhan reads his daily Qu'ran; It's a phenomenon; Lyrics fast like Ramadan," and he notes how happy he was to hear a popular group say the word

"Ramadan."[9] For Omar, Diacritical was a vivid sonic statement that his cultural experiences and religious thought processes existed and were valid.

> I got really into punk, my rebellious stage or whatever, so for a long time I didn't even associate with the browner elements of my upbringing, and I think that's something a lot of diaspora kids go through. Which is like a sort of internal battle with assimilation and conformity and rebelling against your family also means rebelling against your culture.

Omar spoke frequently with me about a battle with assimilation and negotiating a relationship with his culture, and his work actively reflects several significant elements of his upbringing along with the difficulties of growing up in a single-parent household and being a victim of police brutality.[10] But as South Asian artists living in the diaspora found increasing coverage in the *Boston Globe*, *London Guardian*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone*, media confusion over taqwacore's true purpose became evident. *Newsweek's* labelling of Diacritical as an "Islamic band" in 2007 despite having only one Muslim member created artistic and personal tensions that would ultimately lead to the group's break-up (Curtis 2010, 548).[11]

I began my first formal interview with Omar by asking a simple yet provocative question: "So Diacritical was your taqwacore project?"

> I didn't set out to create taqwacore; there was a collective people who were looking for people who fit this understanding. You know they were looking for diaspora brown kids who were making music in the rock or punk genre and they found me, and we became friends, and then Diacritical took on the taqwacore label after. It went so far over so many people's heads that it was discouraging. I mean it was awesome to me that we pissed off our punk rock idols and fundamentalists at the same time, but when people started to talk about it as though it was a specifically religious thing I realized that most did not fully grasp the nuances of the satirical and social commentary that was going on.

[9] Omar Waqar, interview with author, August 21, 2017.
[10] Omar Waqar, interview with author, August 18, 2017.
[11] Though early incarnations of the band had existed before, playing and recording under a few other names with different members, in 2005 the band settled on the lineup: Jason Bomani on bass, Dan Rosenthal on drums and Omar on vocals/guitar.

As the online community that later gave birth to taqwacore grew, Omar feels that he had been pulled into the scene because he fit the genre's ethnic and religious requirements. Although Omar originally connected with artists who spoke to his South Asian and Muslim identifications, Diacritical's lyrics typically touched on a variety of topics including poverty, assimilation, bigotry, xenophobia, and police brutality—not just on his identification as a Muslim within the South Asian diaspora. But as Diacritical adopted the musical label of "Muslim punk," the band was no longer a secular response to political injustices. Omar felt that people completely missed the point; he felt that Diacritical had become essentialized, and the project was boxed in by the Islamic religious identifications placed on his music.[12] Omar provided me with a clear example from his 2007 Diacritical record:

> I have this song called "Ignorance" and the lyrics are "why do you hate me why do you hate me" and the lyrics are about racism, and after taqwacore it became an anthem against Islamophobia. But when I wrote it, it was just about xenophobia and bigotry in general. That's why I didn't write "why do you hate Muslims" I wrote "why do you hate me?" so it could apply to anybody.[13]

To Omar, there is a clear divide between what he sought to transmit and what was perceived by audiences. I believe, however, that there is an even greater conflict between Omar's music and taqwacore and its conception. Omar had already begun to experiment with South Asian Sufi performance traditions as part of Diacritical, a conscious choice that was at odds with the Kominas' ideology and instead more compatible with Junoon's incorporation of Sufi poetry and performance techniques.

[12] As in "diacritical mark," the band's name literally means "able to distinguish."
[13] Omar Waqar, interview with author, August 18, 2017.

In Diacritical's song "Disenchanted," although in a chaotic 6/8 meter, the overarching formal structure resembles that of qawwali by way of Omar's use of "gang vocals," or chanting. The track begins with a moderately-paced chant and drum beat but subsides for Omar's gruff, half-sung opening lines, akin to an opening *alaap*[14] recitative. The South Asian instruments of tabla and sitar were also used during the recording of Diacritical's self-titled album, although Omar refers to their inclusion as more of an afterthought. Once he broke from taqwacore and Diacritical, he studied sitar with a guru for six years and aimed to deepen his knowledge of the subtleties of South Asian and Eastern traditions in order to better situate his Sufi identification and subsequent transmission within the milieu.[15] He began experimenting with these traditions by combining them with various Western "genres," which resulted in Sarmust and EvilArtForm, to be discussed in the next chapter.

[14] The first section which sets the mood for the rest of the performance, exploring the elements of the tonal structure and opening the heart to receive the proceeding message.
[15] Interview with author, August 10, 2017.

"Do-It-Yourself"

Chapter 2

As terminology in common usage, "DIY" or "do-it-yourself" is usually traced to the early 1950s in the United States (Merriam-Webster.com cites 1952). Early uses made particular reference to people undertaking maintenance, repair or modification work on major investment items without necessarily having the specialized training or expertise associated with that work. In such cases, individuals believed they could do the work in question sufficiently well in order to bypass the often costly services of specialist personnel. It moved established forms of domestic activity and self-reliance onto a new scale (Knobel & Lankshear 2010, 5). In the 1970s, punks ran with this idea and survived by transforming the "anyone can play guitar" motto into an ethos that stressed self-reliance following sanitization of the dangerous aspects of rock'n'roll by the corporate music industry. Because established record companies were unwilling to support the underground punk scene, for both practical and ideological reasons, these underground bands could not depend at all on the mainstream industry (Dunn 2016, 12). The commodification and appropriation of punk has frequently undermined the effectiveness of punk's political and social

relevance. Therefore, DIY punk is politically significant in ways that commercial punk is not. By championing the DIY ethos, punk is the intentional transformation of individuals from consumers of the demonizing mythologies of mass media to agents of cultural production; it rejects passivity and instead champions personal empowerment.

Omar is nearly completely self-reliant in terms of his cultural musical output; he seems to do it all—he is a formally trained sitarist and guitarist as well as a singer-songwriter, composer and producer. He compares DIY culture to that of ascetics in Northern India who give up their worldly possessions but still find ways to make music as they travel from shrine to shrine. As part of the DIY scene in D.C. and now Los Angeles, Omar makes all of his own instruments with the exception of his sitar, although he does have a new one in the making. Some come from the bodies of old discarded instruments, and others are made from found objects including cigar boxes and weed eater trimming line. Some of my favorite examples are the old Chinese doorbell and torn-apart Walkman Omar repurposed for his upcoming EvilArtForm release. Omar makes traditional Hindustani instruments like the single-stringed *tumbi* (the smaller Punjabi *ektar*) and the Bengali *gopichand,* but he also creates new instruments such as the *punjtar*, a five-stringed chordophone that is a cross between a guitar and an *ektar*. Yet interestingly, EvilArtForm's "Tomb of the Unknown Bhangra," uses a DIY ukelele-banjo instead of the *tumbi*, further confusing the divide between the different cultural forms.

There is a general dedication to a DIY ethos within punk, even if there are debates about its specific implementations in daily life. Of course, punk music was not the first cultural form to

champion a DIY ethic. Other important DIY media practices and influences ran alongside punk in the 1970s (and earlier), like dance music and fan video remixing, but they were not explicitly countercultural or ideological in the sense that punk was. The birth of hip-hop in the United States was grounded in DJs taking the drum breaks and other parts of funk and rock records and using record scratching and sampling techniques to combine them while the MC rapped over the top, creating altogether new instrumental tracks from previously existing ones while still calling attention to the source material. Musicians who did not have access to recording equipment edited tape recordings to meet their purposes; they sampled and spliced tapes, often literally "cutting and pasting" them, and combined different tracks from one or more multi-track recordings. Remixers of dance music increased tempos, stripped back the sound, extended songs to keep people dancing longer, and so on. When digital sound became the norm, all kinds of "sampling" techniques were applied, using different types of hardware devices or software on a computer (Knobel & Lankshear 2010, 31). The important point here is the innovative "make do" and "invent on the fly" character of the remixing and modification of existing music.

Paralleling the "cut and paste" nature of sampling, an active zine culture[16] had been promoting self-publishing for several decades. Omar also helped publish zines such as *Totally Radical Muslims* to present alternative media representations of Muslims in the United States following his break with taqwacore. In a discursive system that continues to propagate "demonizing mythologies" about the perceived other, diaspora musicians have reacted by challenging

[16] Known as "cut and paste publishing" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2002), these short-run magazines were originally typed texts that were cut and pasted by hand into booklet form and copied. They are self-published, small-circulation, often nonprofit books, papers, or websites which deal with topics too controversial or niche for mainstream media, often presented in an unpolished layout and unusual design.

dominant Islamophobic, racist, xenophobic, and gender-normative discourses in the United States, forging unique identifications for themselves and going beyond typical modes of binaristic thinking (Murthy 2010).

The concept of genre itself is one created by the corporate music industry, and "DIY" as an umbrella term allows Omar to draw from several genres without being boxed in by a label as he was as part of Diacritical. For Omar, punk is not about the "sound;" it's an approach or a "way of being." Although some scholarship may consider punk a cohesive, unified community, Michael Muhammad Knight's narrator in *The Taqwacores* makes possibly one of the most accurate observations about the genre: "Inevitably I reached the understanding that this word 'punk' does not mean anything tangible like 'tree' or 'car.' Rather, *punk* is like a flag; an open symbol, it only means what people believe it means" (Knight 2004, 7; italics in original). By combining Sufi performance tradition with what Omar calls "punk," he is making a political statement by combating both the narrow definitions of "Muslim" and "Sufi."

In *Global Punk* (2016), Kevin Dunn argues that punks work to imagine new ways of being. For Omar, this manifests itself as Islamo-futurism. EvilArtForm first started as Omar's "fun experiment in electronic music" in 1999, but as he started singing over the samples, it became about futurism. I asked Omar the question, "So what does the future look like?" He reached to his bookshelf and pulled down a zine form of *Sultana's Dream* which he helped publish, a 1905 feminist utopian story originally written by Muslim feminist Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain. Originally published in a Madras newspaper, the story tells of women who create science

fiction-esque electrical technology which enables laborless farming, flying cars, and solar power-controlled weather. As Begum Rokeya imagined a world without *purdah*, the traditional practice of female seclusion, Omar imagines a world free of bigotry.

As the past seems marred and the present seems volatile, Omar dreams about a place in the future where maybe these hardships are not as present in society; there is less xenophobia, and people have become awakened to different thought processes and become more nuanced in their understanding. Omar explains:

> Now we are still dealing with race and gender and those biases. But what about when we meet extraterrestrials one day and their species has 17 different genders, what are we going to do about it, right? Then all of our understandings and notions are obsolete… So that's why I find myself living in a fantasy, future world that helps me to explore ideas people are not even thinking about right now.[17]

Futurism is a main theme in Sarmust, Omar's "dance-punk" project, named for poet Sachal Sarmust, often translated in Sindhi as the Ecstatic Saint of Truth. He says it is "rooted in angst but ultimately about activism." Lyrics such as that of "A New World" are influenced by an imagined courtyard between several different worlds and dimensions inspired by the small city of Fatehpur Sikri in North India. It is a place where traditions from different religions, worldviews and backgrounds came together to discuss theology and problems of the day, and it now serves as a reminder of the possibilities of human and cultural co-existence and unity within multiplicity. In EvilArtForm's song "Fornland," through lyrics taken from "The Poet's Death," the first poem in *Gardens for the Lush*, Omar questions if this blissful co-existence will exist and what his death will mean.

Will I be buried in a foreign land?

[17] Omar Waqar, interview with author, August 20, 2017.

When I'm underground will I know where I am?
Will I finally be home?
Will I know what home is?

Omar sings the Sufic lament of the beloved, but instead of the beloved being God, the beloved is his identity, his home or his sense of sanctuary where he lives.

Punk music has traditionally been associated with "scruffy" working class, anti-establishment British youth, but given the genre's trajectory in racist skinhead movements (Murthy 2010, 161), it has since become appropriated by marginalized ethnic groups. A good example is found in the Puerto Rican punk music scene in New York. "Nuyorican" punk bands such as Ricanstruction have "resignified and reconfigured" punk rock's anti-establishment aesthetic to express progressive socio-political aims; the group maintains its Puerto Rican identification apart from mainstream society, yet it confronts marginalization and engages society at large at cultural and socio-political levels. Although not usually associated with multi-ethnic Latinx diasporas, punk values and aesthetics inform the group's image, sound, and social and political sensibilities. Anarcho-punk is central to Ricanstruction's identity formation. Ricanstruction's contribution—a kind of grassroots cultural consciousness-raising campaign—illustrates the coalescing of traditions of resistance and struggle, as it presents an uncompromising and culturally innovative oppositional position that acts as an empowering alternative to current ineffectual social policies and political strategies. Acts of social protest are conducted at the street level, a local sphere where members of the band can directly impact the community through education and cultural awareness programs. Despite the fact that their presence in the commercial popular music marketplace is—by their own choice—limited, the members of Ricanstruction remain on the

cultural fringe, removed from the trappings of unwelcome media attention or mainstream measures of success (Arévalo 2004, 254).

Omar similarly advocates a street level or grassroots approach, which is an essential facet of anarchist culture. He participates and organizes local performances such as "Poets for Peace" and "Artists Against Islamophobia," most of which take place at house shows, old factories, barns, and events organized by local business owners. My fieldwork concluded with attending a Gardens for the Lush performance at a downtown LA bar organized by a local Persian bar owner with an affinity for poetry. The evening began with several poetry readings by local poets, and a local painter was present to create a work of art inspired by the evening's performances. Omar walked on stage for the final performance of the evening, donning light neon makeup, black nail polish, and a black salwar kameez. The educational component was clearly a large part of the performance. Omar explained, "You can be a Christian, Jew, atheist—there were many Sufis who were agnostic."[18] He paused his performance several times to explain components of Sufi performance and poetry, such as *ghazal* poetic structure (autonomous couplets of two to fifteen) and popular Sufi metaphors, including alcohol's connection to divine knowledge. After intermission, Omar spoke of Bulleh Shah's anarchic poetry and his rejection of the religious status quo. In addition to a general lesson on Sufi values, tolerance of various religious interpretations was a central theme.

[18] Fieldnotes, August 24, 2017.

Anarcho-punk culture was born out of punk's do-it-yourself in the late 1970s. Anarcho-punk connected the do-it-yourself ethos with anarchism's perpetual struggle against hierarchies of all kinds. The content of anarchist songs presented allegories drawn from underground media and conspiracy theories or lampooned political and social mores, and live performances broke with many of the norms of conventional rock. Unlike the DIY subculture, concert billings for anarcho-punk shows were shared between other bands and performers such as poets, with the hierarchy between headliners and support acts either limited or completely scrapped, and normally some form of political or educational material was distributed among, or by, the audience. "Promoters" tended to be anyone who arranged a space and got in touch with the bands to ask them to play; hence, a lot of gigs were played in garages, at parties, in community centers, and at free festivals (Gosling 2004, 170). Anarcho-punk is more than just an alternative lifestyle; it is a process of education and political resistance within everyday life.

At a time when tolerance may seem hard to come by (an NBC poll conducted in March 2016 found that 51 percent of Americans supported Trump's Muslim ban, and a 2017 Gallup poll showed that thirty-six percent of Americans still favored a border wall between the United States and Mexico), Omar continues to rely on local performances for diverse audiences as a tool to educate and combat prejudice. When asked to comment on the alienation of women, black people, LGBTQI+, indigenous people, immigrants, and religious minorities during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, Omar urged people to "stop trying to be seen as a hero and instead use that energy to educate people in your own families, address that home grown bigotry, so I don't have to deal with your ignorant uncle's white supremacist views all over my social media"

(Noisy 2016). In a world where political policies are directed towards limiting the role of minorities, religious or otherwise, local discourses about diversity and tolerance are increasingly vital. Additionally, the anarchic aspect of the do-it-yourself ethos allows Omar to create his own cultural output while avoiding unwanted media attention or the essentialization or appropriation of his music.

"Sufi Performance and Poetic Tradition"

Chapter 3

Traditional *khanqahi qawwali*, qawwali associated with a Sufi shrine, is the most popular Sufi music in South Asia (Sarrazin 2016, 167). Khanqahi qawwali shares general traits with the light classical music of North India and Pakistan, but by enhancing the message of mystical poetry and providing powerful rhythms suggesting the repetition of God's name (*zikr*), it has unique characteristics related to its religious function of arousing divine ecstasy and union with God—a culmination of mystical Sufi experience. In listening to songs, devotees respond individually and spontaneously, but the guidance of the qawwal helps to reinforce these emotions. The qawwal presents the poetry in a fluid style of alternating solo and group passages characterized by rhythm and improvisation. The vigorous drum accompaniment on a barrel shaped drum (*dholak*) is reinforced by hand clapping, while a small portable harmonium, usually in the hands of the lead singer, underscores the song melody. A qawwali performance normally begins with an

Instrumental Prelude on the harmonium; then, an introductory verse is sung as a solo recitative without drums, which leads directly into the Song Proper: a mystical poem set to a strophic tune and performed by the entire group, often marked by an ecstatic increase in tempo (Qureshi 1986, 217).

When it comes to achieving a grassroots cultural-consciousness, qawwali is an incredibly effective mode of transmission, as it is a community music practice directly related to deep local roots, reaching out across boundaries of language, caste, class, and creed. More than any other aspect, qawwali's major appeal is its music, which is energetic, flexible, and capable of speaking to all kinds of listeners. These qualities of excitement and arousal are what has attracted music directors and sustained qawwali as a centerpiece in Indian film for over sixty years. Indeed, qawwali has had the power to bring together both Hindus and Muslims across the subcontinent. Omar's first exposure to qawwali was watching Bollywood films containing filmi qawwali, the greatest representation of Muslim-ness in Indian cinema, even in films that do not have a particularly Muslim plot. Qawwali has a remarkable plurality of musical settings, bearing resemblance to both classical and semi-classical musical traditions of the region with a potential to absorb other musical genres within its framework (Sarrazin 2016, 162).

But what is the difference between "authentic" qawwali and "popular" qawwali used for entertainment? Qawwali is considered an occasion, a gathering for the purpose of realizing the ideals of Sufism through *sama'*, or listening to music. Regula Qureshi makes a distinction between different types of qawwali in the very first sentence of her seminal book on the subject,

stating that "all over South Asia there are Muslims; where there are Muslims, there are Sufis; where there are Sufis, there is qawwali—not the popular version of qawwali adapted for entertainment in clubs and on the screen, but the authentic spiritual song that transports the mystic toward union with God" (1995,1). Popular versions, however, are sometimes not easily identifiable, especially in the wake of the wide popularization of the genre, an advancement often accredited by musicians to "the father of qawwali," Amir Khusro (1253-1325). Today's most popular qawwals have performed on stage for thousands; in March 2016 legendary Sufi singer Abida Parveen was invited to perform at the Institute of Business Management in Karachi in front of a student body of eleven thousand students. According to a 2016 account on Dawn.com, "her heartfelt performance had the audience singing and dancing all night long."

Omar's work is heavily inspired by Parveen, and once Omar began consciously transmitting Sufic traditions in his music, he began relying heavily on the YouTube videos of these popular singers. I sat with Omar in his LA studio, dissecting a video of one of his favorite qawwals, the late Aziz Mian, performing "*Ye hai maikada*," otherwise known as the "The Tavern of Love." The performance contains repetition, alternating solo and group passages, *dholak*,[19] Instrumental Prelude on harmonium (*alaap*), and the Song Proper—but the poetic content isn't exactly the sort found in Regula Qureshi's *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan.*

Pīnā harām hai nā pilānā harām hai.	It is not forbidden to drink nor is it forbidden to give someone a drink.
Pīnē kē bād hōś mianna harām hai.	It is forbidden to be sober after drinking.[20]

[19] A two-headed membranophone lacking the exact tuning of the tabla.
[20] Translations are my own.

The crowd cheers, and Mian repeats the lines once more. Mian's lyrics are littered with metaphors: alcohol as knowledge, God as bartender, and drunkenness as an interaction with the divine. Omar laughs, "He's so punk," as Mian stops the performance to educate the audience on the discerning power of clear liquor. Mian was the only prominent qawwal to write his own lyrics, however, he also performed old classical songs that were deemed high status in contrast with new, popular songs (Qureshi 1986, 213). To this day Mian is one of the most popular qawwals in South Asia, although his performances often advocate alcohol (a substance forbidden for Muslims by both Pakistan and Islamic personal law) as a path to obtaining knowledge of the divine.

Dislocation from "the norms of society" speaks to the significance of the combined anarchist and Sufi identifications. While other Sufis might find some behaviors problematic, it is in the hyphenation that they become acceptable; anarchy brings to Sufism a sense of distinction, a way of accepting things like a general lack of hygiene, and in some cases drug and alcohol abuse, as well as other supposedly "deviant" behaviors that threaten the social norms of society. Ethnographer Katherine Pratt Ewing described one of her visits to the most important pilgrimage sites in Pakistan, the Lahore shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh:

> On a field behind the shrine, set apart from the crushing crowds and the *qawwali* at the front of the shrine, men cluster around campfires, protected from the hot sun and cold nights by makeshift tents. Some wander with dazed looks, in long orange gowns, their hair knotted masses; others wear dirty, tattered green gowns and gaudy necklaces… These are the malangs and qalanders, religious mendicants who wander from shrine to shrine… They are called by some the most exalted of Sufis, but they are also the most despised. They are shunned for their reliance on hashish and their rejection of the outer, visible aspects of Muslim law.

To allow the orders of God to structure one's life, the *qalandar* or *malang* must completely abandon the social and material world of ordinary people. He thus becomes utterly exterior vis-à-vis the social world in order to enter the inner, spiritual world. Ordinary people must follow the *shari'at*, Muslim personal law, in order to demonstrate their submission to God. The qalander, in contrast, is concerned only with the interior life, and his relationship to God does not need to be mediated by external rules. Rather, every action involves a direct infusion of the power and spirit of God (Ewing 2006, 215). A divine order often comes in a dream or state of intoxication brought on by hashish, alcohol, or even *qat*, a plant with properties similar to that of cocaine and amphetamines. Michael Muhammed Knight wrote about the practice in a modern context, for example, in his book *Tripping with Allah: Islam, Drugs, and Writing*, in which he discusses his experiments with drugs such as the ritualized hallucinogen Ayhuasca and how that leads to a vision of Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter (Knight 2013, 230).

Sufi poets and singers identify poems rendered in qawwali by two thematic types. The first type, common to all of Omar's projects, expresses mystical love (*'ishq*), ecstatic states (*rindānā*), separation (*firāq*), complaint (*shikayātī*), and the union with the divine beloved (*wisāl*) (Sarrazin 2016, 167). The second type consists of poems with a focus on spiritual lineages, addressing figures of the Sufi hierarchy in praise or devotion. Omar borrows from a plethora of different poems to connect himself to their (his) place of origin. While this may suggest a greater intertext or easily traceable lineage of performance, Omar explicitly rejects any sort of lineage and the elevation of spiritual songs that have "stood the test of time," as it conflicts with the anarchic rejection of hierarchies of all kinds. When I inquired about Omar's *silsila* or Sufi lineage, he

confirmed that although he identifies politically as an Anarchist, "anarcho-Sufi" refers to his interpretation of Sufism itself.

> I looked into the Hamathilladi order [sic] and I looked into the Chisti order in India. I studied a bunch of different traditions. But I guess my biggest beef with them philosophically is that there's always a hierarchical nature... These orders trace themselves back to the prophet or trace themselves back to Ali—and that gives them validity. And for me I don't think that's necessary or important, and that's why I divorced myself from it. That's why I call myself an anarcho-Sufi. Because I'm trying to express the idea that like what I'm trying to get to is the sort of guts of what my favorite Sufi philosophers talked about, *waḥdat al-wujūd*.

Waḥdat al-wujūd, the "union of being" or "unity of existence," allows the believer to connect directly with God through an existential relationship between God and the world, and hence, man. Omar once considered joining a Sufi brotherhood but disagrees with hierarchy and power structure, including the authority given to those who can trace their lineage back to the Prophet or Ali. For Omar, being part of an order is unnecessary to the basis of Sufism.

Like Salman Ahmad of Junoon, Omar draws much inspiration from Bulleh Shah. On my second day working with Omar, he handed me a copy of poetry by Bulleh Shah and told me to read it, as it was essential to my understanding of his music. Bulleh Shah's poetry comes to us through the generations mostly via the qawwals or singers of his poetry, including Abida Parveen, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Abida Parveen, Sabri Brothers, and the Wadali brothers, but at the time Bulleh Shah penned these anarchist poems, Islam had become a fundamental part of everyday life in the Punjab. "Baba Bulleh," as called by his admirers, was a unique voice in the Muslim world as he asked the people to destroy the mosque and the temple since it is in the human heart that God dwells. The concept of "self" is his focal point as he addresses mankind, asking in one of his more famous poems (known as a *kafi*), "Come to Our Abode":

Time and time again you go to temples and mosques,
but have you ever entered your own heart?[21]

This concept of forsaking the established constructs of prayer, and in particular the physical trappings of worship, such as mosque, church, and religious books, later drew universal attention, and it brought new awareness to people who felt disenfranchised by the majority religion and culture by which they were ruled (Unher 2009, 12). Indeed, to speak out against the so-called system was tantamount to blasphemy, or at the very least, it was seen as a rejection of one's own society. Yet it was Bulleh's perspective as a Sufi that guided him away from the formalist religio-political establishment and toward a more open-minded, humanistic, but deeply spiritual view of God in one's own life. As can be seen in "Come to Our Abode," Bulleh makes reference time and again to the rejection of the trappings of religion—the sacred texts, the mosque, the religious hierarchy that governed the lives of Muslims.

Omar has reworked Bulleh Shah's poetry in all three of his projects, but I will use some of Omar's newest songs to demonstrate his transmission of, and relationship to, anarchic Sufism. EvilArtForm mixes a sample of Bulleh's "Tere Ishq Nachaya Kar Key Thaiya Thaiya," Punjabi for "Your Love Has Made Me Dance Like This," over a Chopin tape loop, and in "Fornland," Omar calls out Bulleh's name repeatedly as a tribute. "Bulleya" is then distorted to become part of the underlying rhythmic pulse. At the end of the track, in the pseudo-*bandish* section indicated by faster rhythmic intensity, Omar nearly raps the lyrics.

Pi sharaab tey kha kebab, heth	Drink wine and eat kebab, roasting in
baal haddaan di ag,	the fires of bones

[21] Translation by Unher and Bano, 2009.

Bulleha bhan ghar rab da, ais thuggan de thug noo thug	Oh Bulleh, break into god's house and cheat the cheat of cheats

Although the Punjabi word "thug" literally translates to "cheat" or "cheater," it can also mean "to capture someone's heart." Therefore, Omar sings of a reunification with God, or The Beloved, by capturing the heart of the one who has captured all hearts. In the context of "Fornland," he looks to a future dependent on an intimate relationship with God, one free from the trappings of organized religion and formal religious doctrine.

Because of issues related to his family origin and his rejection of nationalism, Omar does not claim any specific national ties, but rather, he identifies with the entire South Asian subcontinent, incorporating traditions from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Bengal. Omar is quick to recognize the Hindustani traditions that have influenced qawwali, genres such as the ancient form of *dhrupad* and the formal musical structure of Indian *rāga.* In terms of melody, qawwali singers usually deploy traditional musical tunes (raga-based or raga-like melodies) or contemporary melodies. As the *rāg* is used in Omar's ghazals in Gardens for the Lush, the melody of the sitar dances around the notes of the *tanpura*. The tanpura is a classical drone chordophone played by Omar's partner, Ilana Alazzeh, who comes from a strong anarcho-Sufi background in Iran. As she plays two drones that function similarly to the tonic and dominant of a western scale, she also recites a nearly silent *dhikr*, a short, repetitive Muslim prayer. When the sitar finds the tanpura, their musical summation represents a unification with the beloved, or *fana'*, the Sufi concept of "annihilation in love." When the longing of the sitar meets the drone of the tanpura, the listener leaves the physical form and becomes annihilated in spiritual ecstasy.

Although no audience members reach fana' (as described by Qureshi), Gardens for the Lush's "In Dreams," follows the ghazal format in ten couplets. Omar is one of the only people in the world who writes English language ghazals, although they appear in cultures all over the world. Unlike Junoon, who mainly confronted his government in Pakistan, Omar performs almost all of his songs in English in order to confront his oppressors directly. In addition, Omar recites the ghazal with inflection and intonation to highlight certain words of the poem, a technique adopted by slam poets in D.C. This is another clear manifestation of the synthesis of Omar's identifications with both South Asian and Western cultures.[22]

Qawwali vocal rhythms are known for their rhythmic interplay and repetition, and the most important function of the musical flexibility is to build verbal repetition into the song, so that any meaningful text unit may be singled out for repetition or intensification the moment the performer or audience member requests it. The performer, using his knowledge of the qawwali performance idiom and the occasion of performance, takes cues from the occasion to select the musical variables for his performance (Qureshi 1986, 139). In this way, the tradition is transmitted to the audience. During Omar's Gardens for the Lush performance in late August 2017, he described this performance mechanism to a diverse mix of toddlers, engineers, artists, and a group of Chihuahua-carrying women. Omar explained, "There is no audience and performer; everyone is going back and forth and vibing off of each other," and demonstrated the use of the words "vah," "again," and "repeat," which results in a performance of indeterminate length unique to every audience. There are two kinds of repetitions used to enrich a single word

[22]Fieldnotes, August 25, 2017.

or phrase that inspires a listener's spirit. Gardens for the Lush's performances employ *dohrana*, a regular repetition or reiteration at a moderate pace. The other musical concept, *takrar ka halqa*, is used in Sarmust's dance music, creating an encirclement of a repeated rhythmic or lyrical sample (often a combination of both) that sustains the ecstasy associated with qawwali, mainly attained by Omar's use of a circuit-bent drum machine. Sarmust is a project almost exclusively operating as live performance, and therefore Omar's ability to assess a crowd's energy at Sarmust's house party performances is essential in informing his process of repetition in order to move the audience to an ecstatic state of slam-dancing and fist pumping. This serves as another way for the performer to interact with and successfully transmit tradition to the audience.[23]

[23] Fieldnotes, August 24, 2017.

Conclusion

By synthesizing and transnationalizing several local traditions, anarcho-Sufi punk presents an alternative discourse about religion and culture in Muslim and non-Muslim societies, demonstrating that tradition and modernity can indeed co-exist harmoniously, an expansion of Junoon's ideology that taqwacore rejected. In contrast to large-scale "concerts for peace," Omar takes a grassroots approach to educate his local community in order to enact political and social change. This allows him to remain on the cultural fringe and avoid unwelcome measures of success from the media and the appropriation of his work.

As I began working with Omar, I was perhaps most intrigued by his turn from taqwacore to Sufi punk, but I quickly realized that the shift reflected a negotiation between different components of his upbringing and his national, religious, and ethnic identifications. He responded to my question of, "When did you start identifying as a Sufi?" with a brief description of his so-called "rebellious stage"—playing punk music, painting graffiti, and worrying his mom. His extended family assured her that he was just "being a Sufi." But as Omar researched into what exactly being a Sufi meant, he began discovering several parallels between Sufi and punk traditions.

> I found a big parallel between the ascetic traditions in Pakistan and India, like *malangs,* who are people who basically renounce their worldly possessions. And like gutter punks. Those kids who ride the train or whatever. I found a big parallel in that. Like in America we don't have guruship or the tradition of asceticism, but maybe we do, and we just don't recognize it. I've kinda started to marry those things in my head, and I've started to find commonalities within people's experiences.

Not only do the parallels between punk and Sufi traditions allow Omar to forge a unique identity for himself and situate his music making in a Western world, but the DIY ethos allows Omar to to draw from several genres to create his own sonic cultural colleges which speak to his multiple identifications within the South Asian diaspora. While taqwacore created a new positive identity for South Asian diaspora youth by rejecting the excesses of the culturally exclusive post-9/11 policies, Omar finds that anarcho-Sufi punk signifies a greater commonality between cultures, one that he has increasingly embraced and exhibited throughout the trajectory of his career.

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